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CLASSROOM TRANSLATION--A LESSER BUGBEAR.

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AMERICAN ASSN. OF TEACHERS OF GERMAN

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ALTHOUGH TRANSLATION, A SKILL NOT CONSIDERED USEFUL IN A BASIC AUDIOLINGUAL MODERN LANGUAGE PROGRAM, HAS BEEN DISPENSED WITH, READING, ANOTHER SPECIALIZED SKILL NOT AUTOMATICALLY ACQUIRED ALONG WITH THE ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE ORALLY, APPEARS TO BE LESS CONTROVERSIAL. IF, THEN, READING CONTINUES AS A GOAL OF LANGUAGE TEACHING, IT MUST BE TESTED NOT ONLY TO DISCOVER THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE SKILL HAS BEEN MASTERED, BUT ALSO TO IDENTIFY PROBLEM AREAS FOR REMEDIAL PURPOSES. UNTIL READING MATERIALS ARE DEVELOPED THAT INCLUDE EXTENSIVE, COORDINATED SELF-TESTING DEVICES, IT APPEARS THAT THE REJECTION OF EFFECTIVELY USED TRANSLATION PROCEDURES HAS BEEN PREMATURE. IF EMPLOYED PROPERLY TO ACCOMPLISH DEFINITE PURPOSES, TRANSLATION CAN BE (1) A MEANS OF PROVIDING A CONTINUOUS CHECK AND CORRECTION OF FINE-STRUCTURE COMPREHENSION, (2) A METHOD OF TESTING ACCURATE COMPREHENSION ON EXAMINATIONS, PROVIDED THAT THEY ARE CORRECTED WITH THE IDEA OF APPRAISING THE PRESENCE OF FALSE MEANINGS RATHER THAN THE ABSENCE OF CORRECT ONES, AND (3) A TECHNIQUE TO POINT OUT SEMANTIC DIFFERENCES THAT WOULD OTHERWISE HAVE GONE UNNOTICED. FOR THESE AND OTHER POSSIBLE REASONS, IT IS, PERHAPS, TIME TO REINSTATE TRANSLATION AS ONE OF THE MEANINGFUL TOOLS OF THE LANGUAGE TEACHER. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE GERMAN QUARTERLY," VOLUME 40, SEPTEMBER 1967, PAGES 518-529. (AB)

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# CLASSROOM TRANSLATION: A LESSER BUGBEAR?

Lee B. Jennings

We are familiar with the pitfalls of the "old-fashioned reading and translation course." Aside from being dull and not preparing persons to communicate with native speakers of the "target" language, should they one day find it necessary to do so, it stressed a special skill (translation) which is not directly related to the spoken response situation by means of which syntactic patterns are early inculcated in the native speaker and by means of which they are deemed to be best inculcated in others as well. Reading, to be sure, is also a special skill, which is by no means automatically acquired along with the ability to engage in spoken discourse; however it is a skill that no one as yet seems inclined, on those grounds, to dispense with entirely and one that (perhaps for that very reason) seems to serve less as a focus of controversy.

Certainly no one would now question the importance of practice in speaking in the elementary stages of language learning, with exclusion of the student's own language to a large degree (is there not an air of compulsion-neurosis about its total exclusion?). By these devices a kind of *Grenzsituation* is created in which linguistic crutches are removed and the learner is forced to come to terms with the new phenomena in their own right. It is also clear that most of the ordinary communication situations, contrary to what their participants may think, rest upon a code of arbitrary response formulas. One answers "bitte schön" to "danke schön," and vice versa, and the student will get nowhere by pondering the meaning of "bitte" or "schön."

There comes a time, however, when the student has grasped the fact that words are devious, and literal renderings are ineffectual—though he, and perhaps his teacher, will still attempt to ward off the assault upon the rationalistic *Weltbild* by encapsulating the more flagrant cases of non-correspondence between languages in a kind of ghetto labeled "idioms." The student has learned, in any case, that "literal translation" does not always help; it is naive to think that he will be unaware of its existence, since attempts at suppression only lead to the formation of a linguistic black market. In the case of German, this point coincides roughly with the full realization that the verb may appear in odd places, and most of the first year is usually consumed in attaining it.

To judge by the number of "intermediate" readers being produced, reading, i.e., the demonstrable comprehension of printed or typed (or perhaps handwritten) material, is still regarded as an important aim, perhaps the dominant one, of second-year college language work. Even here, though, there might be some disagreement, since the concept of speaking as a foundation for other aspects of language learning always seems to pass over, in some quarters, into the concept of speaking as an end in itself.

If reading is indeed a feasible and legitimate aim of intermediate foreign language work, the question arises as to how this new skill can best be taught. An even more important question is how to determine to what extent it *is* being taught, since reading is by nature a passive occupation that seems to proceed of its own accord, and a person reading falsely looks exactly the same as a person reading correctly; as nearly as anyone can tell without considerable probing, they are both meeting with equal success. Reading most certainly does not convey the ability to speak, but we should not forget that speaking (especially with a limited arsenal of phrases) also conveys only imperfectly the ability to read, and the testing methods developed for a spoken-response situation obviously have little bearing on this quite dissimilar activity.

The most prevalent method of introducing the student to this new sphere of experience is that of immersion—sink or swim. He is turned loose to do the best he can with long selections containing vast numbers of new words. Since many persons can assimilate large amounts of linguistic material and instinctively grasp how the pieces fit together, this method is not as disastrous as one might expect.

The selection of reading material seems intimately bound to the question under discussion, and some remarks about it may not be uncalled for. German is relatively unendowed with classics suitable for beginning work. Hence, demands as to literary merit should be made sparingly, and the tacit or overt hope of training future specialists in the field of German language and literature should not be allowed to sabotage the beginning language program. Arch humor, irony, excessive Weltschmerz, and convoluted style are likely to be poorly received by those struggling with basic communication problems in any language. On the other hand, simplicity in the linguistic realm does not mean simplicity in all other realms as well. It does not mean that everything must be unemotional and prosaic, nor that

the exigencies of travelers are to be elevated to central importance. No one benefits from an hour devoted to carburetors or haircuts—not even those who will conceivably be using German repair garages or barber shops in the near future, for they will find that none of the phrases quite seem to fit (if, indeed, they remember them). In barber shops, for that matter, "Haare schneiden" will go a long way, and in repair garages the customer's own diagnosis carries little weight. Love, death, frustrations, joys, and destinies can all be dealt with in simple language, and it is something of a mystery why they are displaced in beginning texts by carburetors and haircuts.

In any case, we should bear in mind a basic tenet of learning theory: that new material must be presented in assimilable amounts. If there is anything about learning that everyone agrees upon, it is this. Little is to be gained by overwhelming the beginner with either spoken or written discourse the greater portion of which means nothing to him. This does not mean, however, that only an amount of reading should be assigned which can be "gone over in class," since a text simple enough for the student to understand and to master does not need to be "gone over," except perhaps for the purpose of discovering whether everyone has done his lesson, and there are less time-consuming ways of determining this. The classroom time is valuable and should ideally be devoted to the consideration of those parts of the reading which have actually caused difficulty to students who have honestly sought to cope with them. It is, after all, these elements that constitute the really new material, and it is the assimilation of new material that must be the concern of any educator.

The problem, then, is how reading can be taught. To be taught, it must be tested—not to determine merely to what extent learning has taken place, but to find out what difficulties are being encountered and whether they are being satisfactorily dealt with, for these questions never cease to be dominant in language work. Testing as meter-reading is not enough; there must also be specimen-taking, and painstaking evaluation of the specimens.

The peculiar obstacles that arise here are, first, that the difficulties are randomly interspersed in large masses of easy material and, second, they are relatively dissimilar for different persons. Both of these problems are especially pronounced in language learning because of the rapidly expanding volume of raw material, as opposed to theory, that must be processed by the learner. This material, unlike that in

most fields of learning, does not consist of an unfolding body of theory, a fact which teacher and pupil alike often tend to forget; it is almost wholly disordered. It must be ingested a morsel at a time, and, although there are certain practical arrangements of more and less difficult things, the sequence of ingestion is relatively unimportant.

Thus, special methods are necessary in order to arrive at the stage which most other subjects take as their starting point. While no very satisfactory solution to this problem will be presented here, it is hoped that the sometimes ludicrous inadequacy of the current methods will become evident. Thus, there is often an erroneous belief that the difficulties are concentrated in special sentences or paragraphs, whereas by the nature of the thing they are scattered uniformly throughout the text. To deal with all of them is impossible in the given class time, as every teacher knows. Even dealing with those that exceed a certain threshold of troublesomeness is tedious work which tends to detract from the feeling of coherent discourse that ought to be maintained.

Bound to this difficulty is another one, especially pernicious and inherent: that of identifying the difficult elements, i.e., the potential mistakes. There are two direct approaches, one rivaling the other in naiveté: the teacher selects the trouble spots on the basis of his experience, or he asks the students what they have "had trouble with." The difficulties, however, are too elusive for these methods. If the teacher is honest with himself, he will find that, despite his experience, he is continually surprised by errors which he did not anticipate: *Rindfleisch* in *Fraktur* has been read as *Kindfleisch,* leading to bizarre interpretations, or the exclamation *Ei!* has been understood to mean "egg"—errors which are revealed only reluctantly, upon questioning. If the choice is left to the discretion of the students, on the other hand, much time is lost on peripheral, idiosyncratic, and redundant matters. It is the plague of language learning that the learner may be unaware of his own real problems. The reason is that even random combinations of the linguistic units (words) tend to suggest some meaning—not always, however, the same one to different persons. In most areas of learning, moreover, testing is a relatively insignificant problem, since there is a small number of facts or formulations or "right answers" against which progress can be measured. Because of the volume and disorder of the material in language study, such convenient reduction is impossible and the

role of testing is correspondingly expanded to major proportions. One might say that language teaching *is* testing. There are nearly as many norms as there are data to compare with them, and the comparing process, though gradually diminishing in scope, actually lasts a lifetime. It should also be remembered that the natural precondition for this process is a prolonged, or indefinite, stay among native speakers, combined with a mental flexibility which seems as yet to defy analysis, and that the classroom situation cannot duplicate the system of natural checks and balances. The falseness of one's understanding of a word or phrase is ultimately, or most effectively, tested by its negative results; for instance, one is brought the wrong food or one's friends act strangely. The error can be tested also by reference to a dictionary, but only providing one has reason to think one is making an error, or by the reaction of the teacher, only providing the mistake has been somehow communicated to him. It is a waste of time to devote classroom attention to mistakes which are evident as such, for instance those that lead to an unequivocal nonsense reading. It is the mistakes that the student is unlikely or unable to correct in his normal preparatory reading that must remain the teacher's primary concern.

The method of oral—or quasi-oral—questions in the foreign language "based" upon the reading text, to be answered in the foreign language, seems at first glance to have much to recommend it. It converts passive into active use of the language (at least it seems to do so, since the active phase comes after the passive one); it preserves the direct response situation; and it concentrates upon practice in the language rather than discussion *of* the language (though it should be pointed out that the native speaker has not been shielded from all discussion of his language). What this method does not do, however, is to solve our problem of pinpointing and correcting the problems encountered in reading; it is self-deception to believe that it does. It is, at best, a way of practicing spoken response which uses some of the same words encountered in the reading text and thus has the virtue of being not entirely unrelated to that text. But too often it consists merely of questions whose correct answering really depends only upon the knowledge of a single word—in which case a vocabulary drill would be about as useful—or, even worse, it consists of questions that can be answered without one's having understood them. It requires adherence to a certain mystique to think that practice in

using the language before communication has occurred, or after it has ceased, serves some useful purpose. At least it is to be hoped that the conveying of certain ideas will remain the primary concern of those who have to do with languages. Further, anyone who has made up such questions knows that they are exasperatingly bound to a certain type of inane plot development and that they have a way of referring to everything except the difficulties encountered in reading (whatever other skills they may further). They test the things the student could have found out for himself, but not the things he needs to have explained to him. In other words, they pertain only to the coarse structure of language, not to the fine structure which becomes increasingly important in intermediate work. "Gettin_ the gist" of a passage is a more and more dubious accomplishment the more difficult the passages are, and we are all familiar with the monstrosities that come to light when the gotten gists are subjected to close scrutiny.

To take a concrete example, the student may go on for some time unaware of the causative meaning of the word *da,* that is, its use as a virtual synonym for *weil;* although this usage is common, especially in the written language, its misunderstanding is not readily identifiable as a "vocabulary mistake," and it seldom finds its way into question-and-answer sessions. Some may argue that the features of a language which do not occur in active use are not important anyway, and that there is thus an automatic difficulty-screening system at work. But though the practices of active use have often been ignored in the past, they can be approximated only poorly in the classroom, which is a quite different environment and which may even have potentials of its own that ought to be taken advantage of; in any case the feelings of inferiority adhering to it ought to be overcome, and the goal of complete native fluency ought to be realistically modified. The natural screening process, for one thing, must be helped along if class time is not to be squandered upon a reiteration of what is, or should have been, already mastered. It is obviously important to reinforce the knowledge of basic forms—"he thought," "it was," and their equivalents in the foreign language—even in intermediate work, but attention must eventually be directed elsewhere.

Similar shortcomings afflict other tests of comprehension. Multiple choice and true-false tests, while they have the advantage of concentrating upon more passive language abilities and thus providing at least

some differential diagnosis of learning difficulties, still have the disadvantage of unduly stressing rather simple factual matters or of tending to test something other than actual reading ability, for example the propensity for logical reasoning or the relative IQ of question asker and answerer. We are dealing here, too, with pure testing methods, that is, ways of determining quantitatively the extent to which learning has taken place, not with ways of gaining insight into the kind of mistakes being made. As a result, both the possibilities of subsequent evaluation and the immediate significance to the student (who is aware only that his "brain is being picked") are at a minimum.

Even such bizarre methods as having the student read aloud in the belief that his degree of comprehension, or even the nature of his mistakes, will be mystically communicated to the teacher, have been seriously advocated, at least in private, and it seems that neither the purpose of testing nor the limitations inherent in different testing methods, nor yet the central role of testing in language teaching, has been widely appreciated.

A combination of methods is obviously called for. Still, it should be noted that there is particular need of a means of testing fine-structure comprehension, of magnifying, as it were, a random section of text-comprehension in a way that would bring out even those misunderstandings of which the learner is unaware and those which the teacher has not anticipated, a method which would escape the distortion imposed by the stylizations of question-framing. It should be noted, too, that translation accomplishes such a purpose.

We have been told that translation is a special skill, not immediately related to the comprehension and active use of language. Certainly this is a cogent argument, though one may entertain some doubts as to how arcane this skill really is. Surely one ought to avoid also the easy equation of translation with "polished translation" whereby the whole concept of translation is sometimes discredited as a kind of Victorian relic. There is also the question of whether translation, aside from its acceptability as a pedagogical device, may not be a useful skill in its own right that ought to be cultivated in anticipation of the possibility that the student will at some future time be called upon to impart his knowledge of a foreign language to less informed compatriots. This question we shall leave unanswered, however, in order to concentrate upon the argument that translation does indeed serve some purpose in the classroom situation—pri-

marily that of a *test of accurate comprehension*—and need not be entirely rejected just because it was once unduly stressed.

One sometimes encounters students who can translate a passage well but are not correspondingly able to answer "comprehension" questions. This might be taken as proof that translation does not imply or demonstrate comprehension. However, it may indicate instead that "comprehension" questions actually test some ability to abstract and generalize which is not directly dependent on the understanding of language. Certain persons, after all, have difficulty in answering comprehension questions about passages in their *own* language, even though they may seem to understand the individual words and syntax patterns. On the other hand, the ability to answer such questions well may not be so dependent upon immediate language understanding as their inventors suppose. More intelligent students often have an uncanny apperception of what a passage, given certain words that appear in it and certain questions asked about it, is *likely* to mean, and it is naive to think that the exercise of this power will be discouraged by exhortations to read the passage *first, then* answer the questions.

The crucial question is whether "comprehension" questions of the true-false and multiple-choice type actually test the basic or primitive level of understanding which is the real business of language teaching. Translation specimens, properly evaluated, probably test this lower-level capacity better, since contamination with the more sophisticated capacity for abstraction is avoided. In any case, the results obtained by other, perhaps even more questionable methods cannot be adduced to cast light on the efficacy of translation as a pedagogical device.

It is significant, for that matter, that while a good translation may be accompanied, on the same person's examination paper, with a poor performance on "comprehension" tests, it is seldom that we encounter the reverse situation, good "comprehension" accompanied by a poor and crude translation, though we should expect equal discrepancies in both directions if the doctrine of separate and unrelated skills were given full rein. It seems more plausible to assume, not that the good translator has not understood what he has translated, but rather that the ability to "understand," due to the lack of proper theoretical equipment, is being poorly tested.

Thus, we may seriously question whether the ability to express,

in one's native language, ideas acquired outside of it, that is, to reconvey ideas, or translate, is indeed a rare talent requiring a great deal of special training. Those who translate well are not always able to subsume their particular understandings into a broader scheme, but those who have understood well are usually able, in practice, to convey their insights to other speakers of their own language at least moderately well. To take an analogy: appreciating and reproducing music are separate skills, but a person who whistles or hums a tune with crass distortions of rhythm and pitch naturally arouses some suspicion of having grasped the tune imperfectly as well.

The student who translates *Hund* as "hound" may, of course, have been thinking "dog"—or may have envisioned simply a dog—and may have been misled by the sound of the word, especially if he lacks experience in translation. But in the case of a rendering of *nicht einmal* as "not once" where "not even" is called for, of *so was* as "so what," of *man* as "man," we begin to suspect that the word or phrase was not only imperfectly rendered but imperfectly grasped as well; and in the case of "seemingly" for *ziemlich,* "now" for *nur,* "strong" for *streng,* "a long time" for *eine Zeitlang,* it seems even more doubtful that a correct understanding ever really occurred; and granting that the reflexive requires some practice, persistent renderings of the pattern "he himself is afraid" discourage the view that the ethos of this syntactical pattern has been correctly apprehended. It is equally doubtful whether any of these examples would have come to the test by any method other than translation, nor can it be claimed that this failure is due to their relative unimportance as compared to the type of blatant "vocabulary mistake" which *does* readily come to light by other means. Thus, a "comprehension" question might conceivably be constructed on the basis of chronological contingencies to discover whether the phrase *vor einem Jahr* has been correctly understood (though this would fairly exhaust the information to be gained from that particular question); but with more abstract items such as *man* (whose significance should nevertheless be pointed out early) this could be achieved only with a disproportionately cumbersome testing apparatus.

One may argue that some of the mistakes would not have arisen but for the translating. It is questionable, however, whether the type of distortion objectified in a crudely "literal" translation is really eliminated by the avoidance of translation; it may be driven under-

ground to emerge in subtler forms. Certainly the absurdity of literal translations cannot be met head-on, or even made a subject of contemplation, unless some translation is done. A student who has not been apprised of the pitfalls of literal translation will make nearly as poor an impression as one who lacks eloquence in the barber shop.

The oral-response school seems to ignore the spectral "silent translator" in each of us who supplies us, via preconscious channels, with spurious literal translations in the midst of the most rigorous pattern drill (Freud has shown how literal-minded the id can be). It is worth considering whether this shadowy figure should not be exposed and ridiculed rather than being tolerated. Then, too, there is the semantic insight to be gained from the realization that other languages offer entirely different ways of saying things, and that one's own language, too, is an arbitrary and imperfect means of communication haunted by superannuated relics and in the thrall of socially determined usage levels. Such insight, far from being an unwanted adjunct to language learning, seems to belong to its core; should it not be encouraged rather than suppressed? There is, to be sure, little danger of its being entirely neglected, since the intuition of the teacher compensates for a great deal of rigidity in the prevailing theories. At times one gets the impression that it is the designation "translation," rather than the practice itself, which encounters so much resistance; perhaps some term such as "linguistic vector modulation" could be substituted.

Granted, the extent to which a wrong translation is indicative of a wrong understanding, though central to our argument, is difficult to determine, just as the extent to which thought is dependent upon words is still controversial. The student may not actually know whether by "hound" he *meant* "dog" or the more specific concept; perhaps his thought processes had not advanced far enough for the distinction to be relevant. It is possible that he envisioned an *Urhund* and was merely entrapped into making a mistake that would not have arisen but for the insistence upon translation. It is also possible, however, that his vision was that of a long-eared hunting dog, and that the necessity of translating uncovered a mistake which would have otherwise gotten by. It is possible, too, that *eine Zeitlang* was understood during the preparation and merely seemed to have been misunderstood when translation was called for, that under stress the

student used his own language in a way that he otherwise would not have used it; but it seems doubtful.

It would require a painstaking series of semantic experiments to decide the question; indeed, it might not even be possible to do so, since what is really involved is the difficult question of whether one "means what one says," a question the speaker himself may be unable to answer satisfactorily. A possible test comes to mind, however, in which the subject translates a word and—perhaps on a different occasion—selects a foreign-language synonym for it. At present, however, it seems that although we cannot be sure that translation is a reliable index of comprehension, neither can we claim that it is not.

At any rate, translation does serve definite purposes. It is a means of providing a continuous check of fine-structure comprehension with a view to immediate correction of the mistakes uncovered; it can be used, too, as a valuable method of testing comprehension in examinations, providing it is used sparingly enough to be graded with appropriate thoroughness, and providing one does not penalize for the absence of "polishing" but concentrates upon the actual degree of comprehension deemed probable; thus, "dumb" for *dumm* is merely poor English style, with which we need not concern ourselves; "the ball becomes thrown" is awkward but does not really seem to alter the meaning; "still, he was there," however, may convey a quite different meaning from "he was still there." There are borderline cases; one hardly knows whether or not a mindless rendering such as "it handles itself around" (*es handelt sich um . . .*) denotes some rudimentary degree of comprehension. Probably the best rule is to be more attuned to the presence of false meanings than to the absence of correct ones. In the case just cited, it is a fair assumption, on the other hand, that the comprehension was at best clouded and that further clarification is called for, and that mention of a correct English translation would be of help in inducing a better understanding and might even be the most efficient way of doing so. The time saved in identifying and correcting the difficulty can, after all, be used for pattern drills that will consolidate the new insight. The point is that we can expect neither translation, conversation, pattern drills, nor any other language-learning device to accomplish things for which they are not suited.

Finally, translation is a means of pointing out semantic differences

that would otherwise go unnoticed, thus of pointing out that there *is* such a thing as semantics. Perhaps it is time to reinstate translation as one of the important tools of the language teacher. It should now be possible to grant this recognition without being suspected of wanting to exhume the "old-fashioned translation course." Until reading texts come supplied with the copious supplementary self-testing material that will signal the actual, not merely nominal, advent of programming, it is premature to dispense with such useful procedures as translation, properly used, can be.

*The University of Texas*

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